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ABSTRACT

A conceptual and theoretical framework is needed for the literature on newswork and to do this the relationship between skill and control which has been raised as an issue in the Marxist theory of industrial organization needs to be examined. A theoretical reinterpretation might help to understand how the notion of skill on the individual, technical, and subjective levels is related to the broader issues, such as the control of the labor process and the reproduction of social relations. The labor process perspective provides a theoretical connection between the microscopic level of individual workers, such as subjectivity and skill, and the more macroscopic level of social relations. Using a synthesis of Harry Braverman's notion of the labor process and concept of skill and Michael Burowoy's notions of game and subjectivity is illuminating for several aspects of newswork, i.e.: (1) the social world which a newsworker encounters is not a transparently visible field of capital-labor antagonism, but an "imaginary" world where diverse ideological mechanisms, such as the ideology of "making out," or doing a "good job," matter; and (2) the labor process is reproduced through the operation of the job "skill." The philosophical and ethical debates concerning media practices can be informed by this conceptualization of newswork and how it is done. (Thirty-seven references are appended.) (MS)

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# SKILL, CONTROL, AND THE NEWSWORK: IMPLICATIONS OF THE LABOR PROCESS APPROACH

by

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## Introduction

A discussion of media practices entails a conception of newswork, ranging from a "crusading reporter" as an independent critic of social evils to a Marxist conception of an agent of "ideological state apparatus." Much of the philosophical and ethical debates concerning media practices may be informed by a conceptualization of newswork, or a theoretical understanding of how newswork is done. So far, much research has been done on various aspects of newswork, though much of the literature has lacked conceptual and theoretical framework.[1] Therefore, this paper is concerned primarily with a theoretical re-interpretation of what constitutes already common sense in the literature on newswork.

This paper deals with the relationship between skill and control which has been raised as an issue in the Marxist theory of industrial organization. The advantage of Marxist theoretical tradition lies in its emphasis on historical and broad social

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[1] The seminal research has concerned the demographic traits and description of working conditions of journalists. For instance, Johnstone et al (1976), and Weaver and Wilhoit (1986) provide sociological descriptions of American journalists and their work. Diverse research has also described some aspects of journalistic work, such as correspondents (Rosten 1937; Rivers 1962), elite journalists (Kruglak 1955; Maxwell 1956; Lambert 1956), the impact of technology on job (Solomon 1985). Nevertheless, most research has failed to extend itself to theoretical issues.

context. But critical studies have failed to provide a reassuring explanation as to how media organizations "keep in tune with establishment" on the micro-organizational level (Turow 1984, p. 118). For instance, a "structural" explanation of media practices, such as the political economy of Murdock and Golding (1979), which attributes constrained output to the relations of ownership, is vulnerable to a critique. Such an analysis is not to explain what newsworkers are doing; it is merely to presume what newsworkers are supposed to do from organizational imperatives set by the management. How can a theory of newswork retain the micro-level of the experience and understandings of actors so constrained, while taking into account the determining impact of macro-level of social structure suggested in a structural explanation?

The area of media labor may benefit from theoretical impetus of the labor process approach which, since the publication of Harry Braverman's Labor and Monopoly Capital (1974), has constituted a rapidly emerging paradigm in the sociology of work organization. Through a discussion of the labor process approach, I would like to attempt to understand how the notion of skill on the individual, technical and subjective levels is related to the broader issues, such as the control of the labor process and the reproduction of social relations.

## Literature on Newswork: A Critique

The previous literature on newswork has dealt with how journalists manage their work and how the whole process of

newsmaking reproduces itself. That literature, at least, describes newswork and the process of newsmaking on the organizational level. From the labor process perspective, I would like to glean and interpret the fragmentary insights both from the contributions and limitations of the previous literature.

The exertion of job skill and execution of control take place simultaneously in the same newsmaking process, a crucial moment of which revolves around the selection of a news story. To examine theoretically how the literature on newswork deals with the selection process, I would like to modify and rely on the typology of theories which Herbert J. Gans used (Gans 1980, pp. 78-80).

The first category of theories is based on a journalist-centered notion of newswork. It argues that "the news is shaped by the professional news judgment of journalists" (p. 78). Gans seems to assume this theory as naive on the ground that "[journalists] work within organizations which provide them with only a limited amount of leeway in selection decisions, which is further reduced by their allegiance to professionally shared values" (p. 79). Gans does not even present any example of research based on this theory. Nevertheless, this theory provides a "snap-shot" view of what newsworkers are doing: Apparently, newsworkers are independent, active subjects who rely mostly on their own skill of judgment. Though organizational theories serve to disillusion the popular myth of independent

journalists, journalist-centered theory uncovers partial truth which organizational theories tend to forget.

The second, and more theoretical, approach presupposes a sociological notion of newswork. This approach locates the routinization in the news organization and shows how the selection of a news story is influenced by organizational requirements or commercial imperatives (Breed 1955; Sigal 1973; Epstein 1974; Roshco 1975). This approach represents a corrective to the myth of an independent, anti-establishment press. Though, the assumed notion of organization is a too "reified" one, where newsworkers are assumed as agents who execute organizational imperatives. For example, such a conception of agent may be found in the early gate-keeping studies (White 1950). Even though the studies are concerned with individual variances among newsworkers, the concept of gatekeeper tends to assume communicators basically as "agents for system maintenance and control" (Gallagher 1982, p. 153). Such a theoretical bias tends to permeate research on newswork, as well as some Marxist approaches. The "political economy" approach by Murdock and Golding portrays the labor process or the daily activities of newsworkers in terms of "inertia" of organizational imperatives, i.e., the management motive to make as much profit as possible (Murdock and Golding 1979).

However, news organization has a most unpredictable environment, in that the newspaper is for "what is new," and the whole labor process should be done within a certain time limit

(deadline). It may not be assumed simply that newsworkers are smoothly working agents of organizational imperatives. News organizations cannot dictate what journalists do, and control in a physical sense is hardly feasible. To put it simply, news organization has a rather "loose" control mechanism. To the extent that workers secure control over the labor process or retain knowledge necessary for the execution of job tasks, there arises potential variety in the execution of the same job tasks.

Therefore, it might be theoretically devastating simply to reduce the de facto control of output to a presumably organizational or commercial imperative. The reductionist fallacy is more conspicuous in the technological/economic determinists, such as Marshall McLuhan and Marxists, who attribute the control of output to "forces outside the news organization." Though both organizational and extra-organizational theories provide a macroscopic view of how the output of news organizations is constrained, they fail to explain how far the newsmaking process is distinguished from the production process of other commodities. Even if control is assumed as given, organizational theories leave at least two points unexplained. First, in newswork, most of the steps of the labor process, from conception to execution, are performed on the level of individual reporters. Compared to other forms of work, the control of the newsmaking process needs to be explained more on the individual level. Secondly, the organizational theories are not quite explicit as to why journalists work so hard, and as to what functions as incentive to their work specifically.

Given these problems, a more agent-oriented approach, which is exemplified especially by Gaye Tuchman's phenomenological research, may provide fruitful explanations (Tuchman 1972; 1973; 1978). Tuchman's contribution lies in her focus on how individual actors as newsworkers manage the given work environment. The source of control is sought in the daily job execution, which makes their task manageable within a time limit. I would like to elaborate the insight, and investigate how the notion of skill functions as an effective control mechanism as well as furnishes an incentive to newsworkers. Yet as it is common to phenomenological approaches, it is not quite clear how Tuchman's sociology of knowledge is to be extended to a theory of society (see Craib 1984). The labor process perspective provides a theoretical connection between microscopic level of individual workers, such as subjectivity and skill, and the more macroscopic level of social relations.

## Labor and the Labor Process: Marx and Braverman

The notion of the labor process comes explicitly from the Marxian notion of work, which opposes the view of work as purely technical/purposive-rational action. Within the Marxian notion, the ideal resides in the "universality" of human being (Baczko 1965), or in the unity of technical and moral/intellectual elements of human labor, which correspond respectively to entail" "manual" and "mental" aspects. Labor does not exist in its "purely" manual or mental form. Labor always involves a mental element. As John Plamenatz writes:

> All specifically human labour involves activities of the kind we call mental, for it is disciplined endeavour. And human endeavour, to the extent that it involves thinking, the use of concepts and words, is to that extent abstract (Plamenatz 1975, p. 92).

Marx writes that "what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is that the architect builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it in wax" (Marx 1977, p. 284). Here Marx seems to suggest that the mental aspect or, in Braverman's term, "conception" of the labor process constitutes the unique nature of human labor. Therefore, for Marx, the analysis of alienation or the discussion of the "labor process" represents an endeavor to analyze the mechanism whereby the mental or intellectual element is dissociated from the labor process.

The notion of the labor process which Braverman rejuvenated is based on a reading of Marx, especially Capital vol.1. Marx uses the concept of "the labor process" to denote the historically-universal process whereby humans interact with nature to produce use values to satisfy their needs. He distinguishes the "objective conditions of production," i.e., the object and instrument of work, and the "subjective conditions of product," that is, purposeful human activity or work itself (Marx 1977, pp. 980-1). The specific manner, in which objective and subjective factors of the labor process combine, determines the extent of control which laborers retain over direct production.

Marx states that the specific manner, whereby structures of control over the labor process are organized, has shifted historically from the "formal subordination of labor" to the

"real subordination of labor." In the early factories, while capitalists owned the product, workers still possessed the skill and knowledge necessary for the proper functioning of the immediate process of production. In that sense, the control of the labor process by capital remains purely "formal." However, when the capitalist management can control exactly what workers do while engaged in the labor process, workers become "really" subordinated to capital. With the advent of real subordination, workers become separated from both the process and product, and their skills are degraded until they become "living appendages" to the labor process. Marx considers the transition from the formal to the real subordination in terms of the "progress" of deskilling, routinization, and standardization of tasks (Herman 1982, p. 11). If the control is achieved, Marx contends, the production ceases to be a "labour process in the sense of a process dominated by labour as its governing unity" (Marx 1973, p. 693).

Braverman takes from Marx the conceptual framework of the formal-real subordination of labor. In Labor and Monopoly Capital (1974), Braverman argues that, as a tendency in the history of labor (throughout industry, trade and offices), craft as a unity of mental and manual labor, or conception and execution in his term, has been degenerated into a de-skilled industrial labor. His main point is that the increase of managerial control through the separation of conception and execution, the expropriation of skill, or the narrowing of the

scope of discretion, represents the broad tendency in the development of the capitalist labor process.

## The Notion of Skill

What I am concerned in a discussion of Braverman lies in the implications of the concept of "skill" rather than the theoretical conclusion itself, i.e., deskilling as a historical tendency. Critiques of Braverman, such as Richard Edwards, have suggested that deskilling has not occurred in a unidirectional way in any industrial section, and argued that re-skilling and deskilling have altogether alternated, even though deskilling is a long-run tendency (Edwards 1978, p. 109). It is a more complicated issue whether deskilling can be affirmed empirically as a historical trend in the area of newswork, where technology takes a rather marginal status.

It is the concept of skill that is theoretically more suggestive. Braverman highlights the subjective dimension of skill which comprises more than "dexterity." The concept of skill is bound up with craft mastery, that is, "the combination of knowledge of materials and processes with the practical manual dexterities required to carry on a specific branch of production" (Braverman 1974, p. 443). It seems that Braverman conceptualizes skill in a rather multidimensional and comprehensive way. Through a review of literature on skill, Spenner identifies the multi-dimensional nature of skill. He suggests two fundamental dimensions of skill, i.e., "skill as substantive complexity" and "skill as autonomy-control" (Spenner 1983, p. 828). While the

former merely denotes dexterity, the latter concerns "the room for the worker to initiate and conclude action, to control the content, manner, and speed with which a task is done" (p. 829). Braverman's conception diverges from that of the post-industrialists, such as Daniel Bell (1973), who assert that the introduction of new technology entails more specialized technical requirements, and thus entails the up-grading of the skill level of workers. While post-industrialists primarily focus on "substantive complexity," the concept of skill in the labor process approach subsumes more complex dimensions of subjectivity.

Then, what aspect of newswork does such a concept of skill illuminate? In its physical form, for instance, a reporting job may not divided into subjective and objective elements, or conception and execution, which compose different aspects of the labor process. Newswork contains the whole elements of the labor process, i.e., the conception of news (deciding what is news-worthy), gathering (resorting to news source), newswriting, and even putting news stories into computer terminal (what used to be a type-setting function). Though the physical stages of the labor process belong to individual workers, it does not follow that newsworkers have control over the conception of news, which has close connection with political and ethical decisions. The knowledge and skill which newsworkers have represents the rather narrow conscious layer of human subjectivity.

But the concept of skill in media professionalism rarely sensitizes us to the question: What are the implications of the technical conception of skill? Philip Elliott describes concisely that claims to professionalism among reporters are based on "such routine competences as factual accuracy, speed at meeting deadlines, style in presentation and a shared sense of news values," in other words, "skill and competence in performance of routine work tasks" (Elliott 1979, p. 149). In this conception of skill, subjectivity of newsworkers is not eliminated physically, in that nobody dictates what workers are supposed to do and workers decide by themselves what satisfies news criteria. But the criteria, and the skill needed for the job, are defined primarily in terms of technical procedures, speed, or accuracy. What underlies the criteria as an epistemological rationale is a "positivist" orientation that "true" reality is out there, and the "subjective" is an imperfect reflection of the objective reality. Within this "problematic" of knowledge, no question may be raised as to why subjectivity in the labor process is important, or the problem is not even a problem at all.

From Braverman's perspective, the elimination of subjectivity from the skill of newsworkers means less discretion and control over the labor process on the part of workers, leading management to secure a more complete control of the whole labor process. In mental work, technical definition of job skill functions as an effective control mechanism to workers. In

Charles Derber's (1983) discussion of classical professionals, such as doctors, lawyers and engineers, one may get some insights into the implications which the technical definition of journalistic skill may entail. Derber emphasizes that not only industrial workers but professionals experience a form of "proletarianization," the concept of which has been applied mostly to blue collar workers. Professionals are also "degraded" but in a different manner than the industrial craft workers of the 19th century. In analyzing the conditions of "mental labor," he distinguishes between "technical" and "ideological" proletarianization. The technical proletarianization denotes "the lack of control over the process of the work itself, (i.e., the means) incurred whenever management subjects its workers to a technical plan of production and/or a pace of work which they have no voice in creating" (p. 313).

Ideological proletarianization, on the other hand, refers to the loss of control over "the ends rather than means of labor," or "the appropriation of control by management over the goals and social purposes to which work is put" (p. 313). As a result, professionals come to experience "ideological desensitization" or "ideological cooptation." In other words, there is "a rapid collapse in the predominantly 'moral' orientation of the [beginners], and a major shift to a technocratic perspective" (p.327). They come to maintain and invest in the externally sanctioned professional identity, "increasingly based not on distinctive values and moral objectives but on technical

expertise" (p. 331). According to Derber, "(i)deological proletarianization creates a type of worker whose integrity is threatened less by the expropriation of his skill than his values or sense of purpose" (p.316). While professionals still possess a set of specialized skills and knowledge as well as exercise control over their immediate labor process, they are reduced to technical functionaries of large organizations.

In newswork, the routinization of the labor process, or "proletarianization" of newsworkers, in Derber's sense, surrounds the technical "conception" of job skill rather than physical separation of conception and execution. Newsworkers internalize technical conception of news which directs their daily activities and decisions, excluding problematic value judgment or political positions. The "routinized" conception functions as an effective control mechanism to newsworkers, despite the relative autonomy which exonerates them mostly from physical and external control. Soloski (1984) discusses how the autonomy granted in accordance with professionalism in journalism, or the skill of newsworkers, functions as a control mechanism.

At this point, the implications which Braverman's concept of skill provides become clear: At least, Braverman highlights the ideological implications which remain hidden in the framework of technical definition of skill. But also, the theoretical problems of Braverman's concepts loom large. For Braverman, the broadly defined subjective element in the labor process is easily associated with autonomy of workers in their initiation and

control of the labor process. It is implied that subjectivity corresponds to knowledge and consciousness which a "rational" agent owns. Subjectivity appears vaguely in opposition to "technical aspects of the development of the labor process--'technical' in the sense of workers' relations to the physical process of production" (Edwards 1978, p. 110).

But such notion of subjectivity is rather problematic. Since his conception of worker is a conscious agent, the more skill a worker has, the more autonomy and control of his/her own labor process the worker retains. Then, especially the case of newswork is perplexing. Even though the separation of conception and execution does not occur mechanically or physically, newswork becomes routine and strait-jacketed, as many media critics suggest. Is newswork really de-grading or being de-skilled? If deskilling does not take place in the sense of a mechanical separation of subjectivity from the labor process, how is the control of newsworkers in their labor process ascertained? If newsworkers are so strait-jacketed and controlled, far from getting into resistance to and conflict with management, why do they work so dedicatedly? The problem of subjectivity which Braverman articulates as the concept of skill needs to be elaborated theoretically.

## The Problem of Control

In a sense, for Braverman, skill and knowledge refer to the conscious level of subjectivity, which workers need to maintain in order to resist the capitalist attempt to secure a complete

control of workers. Braverman's rationalistic, thus problematic, notion of subjectivity leads him to understand organizational control mainly in terms of external control through deskilling. It is implied that, if workers fail to retain control over the labor process, it is because workers have lost knowledge and skill concerning the labor process. The workplace Braverman portrays seems to involve an antagonistic, at least potentially conflict-laden, relation between management and labor. Also, if skill has such a strategic importance, the workplace may turn into a battle field for hegemony over the labor process.

But such a simplistic assumption concerning the management-labor relationship is rarely suggestive to understanding newswork. The workplace may be neither a battle field nor a locus of peaceful co-existence. Braverman's conception is neither suggestive as to how the labor process is reproduced. Michael Burawoy (1979; 1985) provides illuminating insights into how the labor process is reproduced, or more specifically, how consent is organized in the workplace. Burawoy suggests a "relational" view, arguing that the shop floor is operated not through one-sided coercion or domination but through "manufacturing consent." He writes:

> Unlike legitimacy, which is a subjective state of mind that individuals carry around with them, consent is expressed through, and is the result of, the organization of activities. ... Within the labor process the basis of consent lies in the organization of activities as though they presented the workers with real choices, however narrowly confined those choices might be. It is the participation in choosing that generates consent (Burawoy 1979, p. 27).

To explain the mechanism, Burawoy introduces the notion of a game. Cooperation revolves around "making out," a "game" in which the goal is to make a certain quota, and whose rules are recognized and defended by workers and management alike (1979, p. 10). This making out has the effect of generating consent to its rules and of obscuring the conditions that framed them. The very act of playing a game produces and reproduces consent to the rules and to the desirability of certain outcomes. Therefore, the game becomes an ideological mechanism through which necessity is presented as freedom (1979, p. 38).

The game metaphor helps explain how the control of the labor process in the newsroom is ascertained. Since Burawoy finds the game phenomenon even in the piece-rate system and assembly line, it is not clear how far the notion of game, as an analytic tool, can be varied, ranging from non-bureaucratic control to bureaucratic counterpart. Nevertheless, some implications may be drawn from Burawoy's discussion.

First, Burawoy's notion of game highlights the ideological aspect of the individualism in making out. "Making out ... inserts the workplace into the labor process as an individual rather than as a member of a class distinguished by a particular relationship to the means of production" (1979, p. 81). And the system of reward is based on individual rather than collective effort. Making out appears to correspond merely to doing a "good" job based on individual job skill. Since doing a good job is just a matter of technical performance, what is highlighted is

rather the individual caliber of doing well within the given rules of the game. However, what obscures making out as ideological is that the rules of the game are not suspect but assumed as given.

Similarly, newsworkers make out by meeting deadline, finishing job quota, and sometimes getting a by-line or even a "scoop." In the day-to-day play of the game of making out, newsworkers exercise considerable control over their own activities, or enjoy autonomy in the daily job execution. The highly unpredictable job environment of newsworkers renders it rarely feasible to introduce control in a physical sense. Almost the only conspicuous control is the prime organizational requirement: "getting the story in time to disseminate it" (Tuchman 1978, p. 78). What obscures to newsworkers themselves the ideological nature of news practices lies in the individualist nature of playing the game of making out. The constrained nature of autonomy is obscured by the fact that newsworkers "own" skill and knowledge, and the workers themselves initiate and execute the labor process.

Another implication may be drawn from the first point. Provided that the individualism of playing the game of making out has ideological nature, Burawoy's notion of "skill" may not necessarily represent autonomy as with Braverman. In Braverman's sense, retaining the subjective side of the labor process, i.e., conception or skill, means more autonomy on the part of workers. On the other hand, the expansion of the objective side, the

technical aspect and the division of labor within the workplace, means that more control resides on the part of management. It is no surprise that Braverman tends to identify skill vaguely with subjectivity and, in turn, the possibility of autonomy in the labor process.

But Burawoy denounces such a simple dichotomy. Burawoy's notion of subjectivity appears in a more complex way, and subsumes the levels of more than "consciousness." For him, skill may not only provide workers with autonomy but also function to control them. From time to time, skill may function as a more effective control mechanism. Especially in a highly unpredictable environment, considerable autonomy needs to be given to workers. In such a case, skill serves to stimulate workers to work more diligently and voluntarily, and confine the output in a desirable direction.

The subsequent implications are quite suggestive to newswork. News as product is confined within a certain limit even though journalists have considerable discretion due to unpredictable environment. Then, in newswork, where does control come from? Some literature tends to attribute control to organizational imperative, associating autonomy with professionalism (Stark 1962; Sigelman 1973). But more recent research emphasizes that control mechanism of newsworkers lies in the job skill (professionalism) of newsworkers (Tuchman 1978; Soloski 1984). Skill becomes for newsworkers the most effectively binding norms. Skill is a highly individualistic and

technical matter. For that reason, even though the discretion of newsworkers is confined within what skill dictates technically, newsworkers may have a strong sense of autonomy and freedom, which serves to secure and maintain the participation of workers in the game.

In sum, Burawoy's approach provides some theoretical insights for investigating the newsmaking process in its complexity. He comprises theoretically not only the active and indeterminate nature of individual actors but the control mechanism of the process.

## Conclusion

This paper has dealt with the relationship between skill and control which has been a central theoretical issue in the Marxist theory of the labor process. The emphasis is placed especially on Braverman and Burawoy to illuminate some aspects of newswork.

The concept of skill, which Braverman has revived on the basis of Marx's idea of labor, highlights the level of subjectivity involved in the labor process. Skill means more than the complex dexterity to meet the technical requirement in the labor process. Subjectivity has significance partly because the individual labor process represents a micro-level of social relations. An exclusively technical conception of job skill helps reproduce, through the daily practices in the workplace, the given social relations. For instance, job skill in newswork tends to be defined in terms of technically routinized procedures, de-legitimizing value judgment or political

positions. Based on a technical conception of skill, professionalism in journalism bears the authority which the values, such as the "objective" or "scientific," are presumed to carry. Then, the daily activities are strait-jacketed not in the sense that the management "controls" the workers, but that newswork is done in accordance with objective conventions. Invididual workers still preserve a sense of autonomy. Thus, professionalism in newswork lets the relative autonomy to function as an effective control mechanism to newsworkers, and helps reproduce the dominant media practices. Braverman's concept of skill is suggestive to demystifying the authority which the technical, objective appearance of job skill generates. For instance, the introduction of new technology into newsrooms, such as VDTs, can be re-evaluated in terms of its impact on the broader issues, such as the symbolic/ideological world of newsworkers or the control of the labor process by management.

Nevertheless, Braverman's rationalist bias, which sees the subjective dimension of skill primarily in terms of conscious knowledge, undermines his contribution. It is implied that, the more skill a worker has, the more autonomy and control over his/her own labor process the worker retains. A more sophisticated discussion of subjectivity underlies Burawoy's notion of the "game" of "making out." While Braverman assumes that a recovery of subjectivity (or skill) allows more autonomy and discretion to individual workers, for Burawoy, the indivIdualist nature of skill may obscure the ideological nature

of the game of making out. Making out in newswork, through meeting deadline, getting a scoop or by-line, appears to be an exclusively individual matter, in other words, the ability to do a "good job." A participation in the game of making out may not lead a newsworker to feel that she/he is in the position of a collaborator with the status quo. The social world which a newsworker encounters is not a transparently visible field of capital-labor antagonism, as Braverman implies, but an imaginary world where diverse ideological mechanisms, such as the ideology of making out, or doing a good job, matter. Burawoy's complicated discussion provides theoretical insights into how the labor process is reproduced through the operation of the job "skill," the theoretical importance of which Braverman discovered.

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